

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS CURRICULUM SUPPORT

Drama

The Importance of Being Earnest

Learning and Teaching Guide

[HIGHER]

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Introduction

This publication has been written as Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* has replaced *Juno and the Paycock* as the Irish Set Text for the SQA Higher Drama Examination. The new material has been written both as a resource for teachers and as a study aid for students working on Unit 2 (Study of a Text in its Theatrical Context) of Higher Drama.

Section 1 is brief summation of Oscar Wilde's life and a context to the time of the writing of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It is to be used to support students' further study into the background of Oscar Wilde and his life. This section also includes a simple chronology listing of the key events and writings of Oscar Wilde. The section closes with some overall information specific to the play itself

Section 2 provides a list of the features of each key scene in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which would be important in any production of the play. It also provides space for the student to record why each key scene would be important in his/her intended production. Acts One and Two have been separated into two parts for analysis.

Section 3 provides a directory of possible acting pieces in terms of casting, suitable length and specific challenges to the actor.

All textual references are to the recommended edition of the text which is published by Penguin Classics, London (2000). This is the three act version as usually performed, and redrafted by Oscar Wilde at the request of the producer of the first performance in London in 1894.

Other resources for this unit include the following:

- The Arrangements for Drama published in 2004 containing detail of content, suggested learning and teaching approaches, guidance on assessment and unit descriptors.
- The Subject Guide for Drama, the first instalment of which was published in 2004, includes guidance on learning and teaching in general, bi-level teaching, differentiation, workshop approaches to the text, health and safety guidelines, ensuring appropriate access for students with special education needs.

- The National Assessment Bank packages published in 1998, and updated in 2004, for each unit of Drama include all checklists, task sheets, marking instructions and guidance necessary to carry out the internal assessment of each unit.
- A video published in 1998 exemplifies standards of practical performance for Investigative Drama (Unit 1), and for Acting in both Study of a Text in its Theatrical Context (Unit 2) and Contemporary Scottish Theatre (Unit 3).
- Additional resources and material are continually being published by the SQA and can be found at <http://www.sqa.org.uk> This includes *The Body of Knowledge* which is useful for terminology to describe your intentions for a performance.
- *Curriculum for Excellence* creates a framework for the quality and breadth of learning and teaching expected from Drama and the Expressive Arts in Scotland; specific outcomes for the Expressive Arts can be found at <http://www.curriculumforexcellencescotland.gov.uk>.

Section 1: Context

Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was born in 1854 and died in 1900. He wrote nine plays, one novel and several poems, articles and reviews. Biographical information is not necessary for a contemporary performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. However, the context of his life and writings offers an insight into the deeper meanings contained in his writings and the society he was writing in. With this knowledge a depth in performance can be offered that otherwise may not be possible. By understanding Wilde's intentions and thematic ideas, it is possible to better realise the play. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a verbal play where the words have greater importance than the actions surrounding them. To communicate the wit and irony of the language of the play, it is necessary to better understand Oscar Wilde and his intentions.

The younger of two children, Wilde was born into an educated family. His father was knighted but it was his mother who seems to have been the greater influence on him. Like Wilde she hid behind masks and pretences of her origins and age. Wilde's older sister Isola died when she was 10 years old. This seems to have permanently affected Wilde for although his work was imbued with wit and repartee, it also held a macabre and childlike aspect that forever reflected back to his family.

Wilde went to Trinity College and then to Oxford where he became influenced by Professor Ruskin and then Professor Pater. While Ruskin was an authority on art and architecture, it was eventually Professor Pater who would introduce Wilde to the concept of aesthetics. This was where the study of pure beauty and art for art's sake. It led to the desire for personal experience above all others. From then on, Wilde associated himself as an aesthete.

After university, he went onto London. He aimed to be a writer but gained notice due to his flamboyant dress sense, wearing velvet coats and silk shirts. He became an editor, and had fairy tales and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* published. He married in 1884. With these growing successes he wrote a second play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, which was successful. Wilde had become fashionable. He then wrote *Salome* and *A Woman of No Importance*.

This was followed by poems, and in 1894 he wrote his final two plays *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

However, it was Wilde's lifestyle that gained him most attention and finally led to his downfall. He had met and been attracted to Lord Alfred Douglas, a young man who hated his father, the Marquess of Queensbury. Lord Douglas' mother was the character that Wilde based Lady Bracknell upon. When Wilde chose to have a homosexual relationship with Douglas (at that time illegal and highly socially unacceptable), Marquess publicly labelled Wilde a 'sodomite'. Wilde sued The Marquess of Queensbury and lost. Wilde was sent to Holloway prison for two years, and was transferred to Reading Gaol during this period. The hypocrisy of Victorian society reflected the false mannerisms of the characters in Wilde's plays. Those that had thought Wilde wonderful now ostracised him.

On release from prison, Wilde travelled to Italy and France. His mother and his wife died within quick succession. Wilde took to drink, was often ill and had little money. He died bankrupt only three years after his release on 30 November 1900, in Paris.

One hundred years after his death, his plays are amongst the most popular in the world, and his personal effects, when auctioned, can reach five figure sums. A questionnaire he filled in at Oxford was sold for £23,000; letters sell for £16,000. Sadly Wilde is still remembered more for his private life than for his art. He would have despised this as he believed in glorifying art for art's sake.

A chronology

Although the dates here are agreed to be accurate, Oscar Wilde was a man who hid behind masks and was often deceptive about his own life, not the least being his age. He often passed others comments off as his own. Indeed, in referring to a witticism spoken by the artist Whistler, he wished out loud that he had said it. Whistler's response was 'You will Oscar, you will'.

- 1854 born in Dublin
- 1864 starts Portora Royal School at Enniskillen
- 1871 goes to Trinity College, Dublin
- 1874 attends Magdalen College, Oxford; gains double first
- 1878 awarded Newdigate Prize for his poem 'Ravenna'.

CONTEXT

- 1881 publishes his first volume of verse, *Poems*
- 1882 tours the United States; writes *Vera*
- 1883 writes *The Duchess of Padua*
- 1884 marries Constance Lloyd
- 1887 editor of *Woman's World*
- 1888 publishes fairy tale collection *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*
- 1889 publishes *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* and *The Decay of Lying*
- 1890 serialisation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Lippincott's Magazine
- 1891 publishes *Intentions, Lord Arthur Sayville's Crime, and Other Stones, A House of Pomegranates, and The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his only novel
- 1892 writes (in French) *Salomé*
- 1893 writes *A Woman of No Importance* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*
- 1894 writes *An Ideal Husband*
- 1895 writes *The Importance of Being Earnest*; sues for libel, but then abandons the case; imprisoned for two years for homosexuality
- 1897 writes *De Profundis*
- 1898 publishes *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*; his wife dies
- 1900 dies of cerebral meningitis in Paris

The Importance of Being Earnest

The original *The Importance of Being Earnest* was a four-act play that Wilde then edited to the three acts currently performed and studied. It was widely revised by Wilde at the request of George Alexander, a producer. Wilde managed to tighten the structure so that dramatically it worked better; however, it lost some witticisms and clarity of plot elements.

In the original version the opening of the play is hardly changed. The relationship between Lane and Algernon remains, demonstrating the differences between the man and the master. There was also some initial dialogue between Algernon and Jack removed, which only set the ground for some the future lies they would both tell. The debt mentioned in the play, owed to the Willis's, was originally the Savoy and suggested that Jack was regularly in debt but Wilde excised this as it slowed the plot and lacked the sharpness of wit that other scenes had.

Wilde mainly removed lines that would lessen the caricatures of the characters, in particular Lady Bracknell's entrance.

In Act Two, the character of Moulton the gardener was lost as many references to death that Reverend Chasuble makes. This was probably for Wilde to keep the play light in tone.

The cut scene that was probably of most interest is that of Grisby (of Grisby and Parker Legal Firm). He arrived halfway through Act Two to serve a writ for debt on 'Earnest'. Of course the debt is for Jack, but it is Algernon pretending to be 'Ernest' that deals badly with the situation leading to much farcical misunderstanding.

Miss Prism's dialogue was greatly cut in Act Three, losing some witticisms. The original Act Four became part of Act Three with Lady Bracknell's arrival. The cuts in this section contain Wilde's condemnation of writers and artists. The cuts do not really change the play, and indeed make the plot flow faster, allowing pace and clarity in humour. However they also suggest that the original writing contained a more widely attacking satire on political, cultural and society ideals in Victorian Britain.

The remaining plot is fairly straightforward, perhaps explaining its continued popularity. Many published editions of the text contain the Grisby scene as an appendix and it is interesting to read.

The three-act version is the one that is usually known, and widely accepted as Oscar Wilde's masterpiece.

Act One

Jack Worthing arrives at Algernon Moncrieff's fashionable West End flat in London. Algernon is expecting Lady Bracknell, his aunt, and her daughter Gwendolen, whom Jack is courting. Algernon knows Jack as Ernest. Algernon and Jack discuss the fact that they use fictitious friends and relatives to avoid people. Algernon calls this 'bunburying'. Jack reveals that his real name is Jack Worthington and he calls himself Ernest when in London. Algernon wants to know why Jack has a cigarette case with the inscription 'From little Cecily with her fondest love'. Cecily is his ward.

Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive. Algernon claims he must visit his friend Bunbury to avoid Lady Bracknell's reception. While Algernon distracts Lady Bracknell in another room, Jack proposes to Gwendolen. She explains that as she will only marry someone named Ernest she will accept. Gwendolen believes Jack to be called Ernest. Jack decides he has to be re-christened Ernest. Lady Bracknell returns and refuses the engagement due to Jack's lack of social status. This is due to the fact that Jack was found in a handbag at Victoria Station. On her way out, Lady Bracknell tells Jack that he must find some acceptable parents if he is to ever marry Gwendolen. Gwendolen returns for Jack's address in the country. Algernon overhears and writes the address down. He has decided he wants to meet Cecily and will 'bunbury' in the country.

Act Two

At Jack Worthing's country estate Miss Prism, Cecily Cardew's governess, is teaching Cecily in the garden. Miss Prism describes Jack as a sensible and responsible man, unlike his brother Ernest, who is wicked and has a weak character. She teaches Cecily that good people end happily, and bad people end unhappily. It is revealed that Miss Prism wrote a romantic novel when she was young. The local vicar, Canon Chasuble arrives takes Miss Prism for a walk in the garden. Algernon arrives pretending to be Jack's brother Ernest. He immediately falls in love with Cecily's beauty. Algernon decides to stay for the weekend, and escape before Jack arrives on Monday. Jack arrives early claiming that his brother Ernest has died. Angry that Algernon is pretending to be Ernest, he orders him back to London. While Jack goes out, Algernon proposes to Cecily, who gets out a diary and letters that she has already written, explaining that she had already imagined their engagement. She has always wanted to marry someone named Ernest. Algernon now has the same problem as Jack and resolves to be rechristened.

Gwendolen arrives and discovers Cecily, of whom she is jealous. They discover that they are both engaged to Ernest Worthing. Over tea they

verbally fight. Jack and Algernon arrive and while trying to explain the situation, cause both girls to fall out with them.

Act Three

Jack and Algernon find Gwendolen and Cecily. They explain they will both be rechristened Ernest, and the women agree to stay engaged. Lady Bracknell arrives and on learning Cecily's wealth, gives her consent to her engagement to Algernon. She still refuses Jack to marry Gwendolen due to his lack of parentage. Jack uses his power over Cecily to refuse her engagement to Algernon unless Lady Bracknell relents on her refusal to allow him to marry Gwendolen. Reverend Chasuble arrives for the christenings which Jack cancels. Reverend Chasuble says he will return to the church where Miss Prism is waiting to see him. On hearing the name 'Prism,' Lady Bracknell immediately calls for Miss Prism. It is revealed that Miss Prism was the governess who lost Lady Bracknell's nephew 28 years earlier. Miss Prism explains that in a moment of distraction she placed the baby in her handbag by mistake and left him in Victoria Station, confusing him with her novel, which was placed in the baby carriage. Jack rushes to his room and retrieves the handbag he was found in, the same one Miss Prism lost. Finally Lady Bracknell realises that Jack is Algernon's older brother, son of Ernest John Moncrieff. Jack's real name is actually Ernest. The play ends with the engagements finally of Jack and Gwendolen, Algernon and Cecily; and Reverend Chasuble and Miss Prism.

The 1895 premiere followed on from the success of *An Ideal Husband* and *A Woman of No Importance*, which both were currently on in London. In addition, *Lady Windermere's Fan* had recently had a very successful run under George Alexander's Theatre. Thus on the opening night of 14 February 1895 at the St. James Theatre, Oscar Wilde was very much in vogue. It was fashionable to see his plays.

He was very involved in the first production and while often seen as a master of the verbal, Wilde also focused on extending the parody of mannerisms to the physical performances of the actors, commenting on his desire to create an almost dance choreography to some set pieces. This could also be seen in other productions of his in London at this time.

The play was initially a success despite the efforts of Lord Queensbury to disrupt the opening night. However, when Wilde took Queensbury to court on the accusation on libel, it eventually led to Wilde being convicted and imprisoned for homosexuality. The negative publicity of the court case in Victorian England meant that the audience chose not to see Wilde's plays. Alexander even removed Wilde's name from the advertising for *The*

CONTEXT

Importance of Being Earnest but to no avail. The play's run finished after 83 performances. Alexander bought the performing rights to the play and to *Lady Windermere's Fan* as Wilde's trial and conviction had led him to bankruptcy.

Wilde died penniless in Paris, France; on 30 November 1900. *The Importance of Being Earnest* went on to be revived and has become Wilde's most enduring and popular play. It is referenced in modern 'pop' culture and the successful portrayal of Lady Bracknell as a character or indeed caricature is a role that many leading female actors have used as a method of showing their abilities outside of a Shakespearean role.

Section 2: Overall directional interpretation and dramatic commentary

Examination requirements

The SQA arrangement documents require that all students undertake four key areas of assessment for the set text. Students must perform a role from the set text chosen. This is part of the external Acting Examination that students take part in two to three months before the written paper. A visiting examiner will assess the students' performances. Suggested scenes and characters are offered in Section 3 of this resource. However, the three areas covered here relate to the written examination that will be undertaken at the end of the course.

Before analysis of the play is undertaken, we will look at the various elements of assessment more closely. Assessment is important as it demonstrates knowledge, experiences, capacities, activities and skills. It also allows for evidence of how these areas have been developed. This is what the SQA requires, and what *Curriculum for Excellence* aims to allow. By understanding what is asked of a student at the end of a course, it allows the student to be actively thinking about what they need to do throughout the whole learning experience. It also creates a practical purpose for the learning experience, about the enjoyment of learning.

A successful course should develop:

- successful learners
- confident individuals
- responsible citizens
- effective contributors.

Therefore, assessments are not a hurdle but part of the learning experience that should be an exciting challenge.

The great thing about Higher Drama is the assessments are not the goal of the course, but part of the learning experience. Study of *The Importance of Being Earnest* provides an understanding of aspects of society and a citizen's place in it. It will allow you to interpret the text and apply your ideas and

contribute them. You will realise your capabilities and in performance develop your confidence. All this will be possible as you will realise that you have applied your knowledge and experiences as a successful learner.

SQA

The final examination is not the only assessment of this Unit of the course. Before the examination, the areas to be assessed, known as the Performance Criteria, have to be demonstrated to an acceptable set of standards. The SQA require this and evidence of achieving these outcomes. You will do this through your normal class work, and the evidence is a matter of recording your processes under your teacher's supervision.

Outcome 1

- Demonstrate awareness of the historical, social and theatrical context of a play.

Performance criteria

- Describes correctly the historical and social context of the play.
- Explains clearly the conventions and styles associated with the writing and staging of the text.

Evidence requirements

Written or taped evidence that demonstrates that the candidate has met the above performance criteria.

Candidates should demonstrate understanding of **one** from the range of conventions and styles:

- structure and language
- staging and architecture, use of theatrical effects associated with original production
- the characteristics of any recognised dramatic genre(s).

Outcome 2

- Make an exploration of how a play could be communicated through performance.

Performance criteria

- Demonstrates understanding of the themes, issues, action and characters of the play.
- Demonstrates clearly and with justification, own overall directorial interpretation of the play.
- Demonstrates, with justification, staging, design and acting concepts to communicate own overall directorial interpretation.

Notes on the range of the outcome

- Themes and Issues: relevance to a modern audience and possibilities for individual interpretation.
- Characters: motivation and role in play, relationship to other characters, development within the action of the play, playwright's intention and candidate's individual interpretation.
- Staging and Design: theatre spaces, forms of staging, actor/audience relationship, set, costume, lighting, sound, props and make-up.

Evidence requirements

Taped and/or written evidence that demonstrates that all the above performance criteria have been met.

Outcome 3

- Perform an acting role from a prescribed text.

Performance criteria

- Interprets the character convincingly, showing use of textual clues.
- Uses a voice which is appropriate both to character and clarity of words.
- Uses movement which is both appropriate to character and makes effective use of the acting space in relation to the audience.
- Interacts effectively with other characters.
- Communicates effectively the overall portrayal of the character to the audience.

Evidence requirements

Performance assessed by staff checklist. The candidate is expected to sustain the role for around five minutes and to communicate with an audience that may comprise the other candidates in the teaching group. Where spoken language is not the candidate's main mode of communication, special arrangements will be made.

Examination

Students have to complete the following:

- a written essay
- a ground plan
- a dramatic commentary.

All these areas require the student to demonstrate knowledge of the context of the play, knowledge of the play itself (including characterisation, structure, language and themes), and finally a practical implementation of these ideas as a director and an actor.

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

There is a time limit of 2 hours and 30 minutes in total for the written paper.

Written essay

This is Section A of the exam. There are four questions offered for response. These questions must be able to be related to all 12 texts studied.

The areas each question covers may be any of the following:

- design concepts
- staging
- specific scene importance
- historical context issues
- genre
- key characters and acting skills required
- language usage
- directorial ideas.

Each question has two parts. It asks you to discuss the text in relation to one of the previously mentioned areas. It then requires you to write how you would use this knowledge and apply it in a performance.

The great thing is that the questions allow you to be creative and demonstrate the understanding you have. It is recommended to spend one third of the examination time on this section as it is worth one third of the mark (20 out of 60). This would mean around 45 to 50 minutes.

Dramatic commentary

The dramatic commentary and ground plan are Section B of the written examination and linked together.

You will be given a brief extract of the play, and asked to direct that scene on paper and also draw a set plan as a **ground plan**. The ground plan is a view from above of the set, similar to a map.

You should include the following information on your drawing:

- stage shape and audience position in relation to the stage
- entrances and exits
- starting positions of characters involved, for the start of extract given
- logical staging, showing any set on stage, including flats and treads and rostra
- a clear 'key' for the design.

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

You should make your design clear and accurately labelled. It is not test of your art work, but of your ideas. Your ground plan must be practical and relevant to both the play and your directorial commentary. The great thing is that you can use your ground plan as you write the directorial commentary to imagine where you wish your actors to go as you describe it on paper. The ground plan is worth 4 marks out of 60. It may not seem like much, but with clear preparation, it can be a guaranteed 4 marks and make the difference between two final grades.

The ideas you show in the **dramatic commentary** must link to the ideas you wrote about in the essay for Section A of the examination. It should also link clearly to your ground plan. There are three areas to cover:

- moves and interpretative notes for actors
- justification
- any important technical effects.

In the examination each page of script has a blank page opposite. It is useful to place these areas as headings on the page opposite, and write ideas in columns underneath.

You must justify any decision you make, based on your understanding of the play and what you wish to communicate to the audience. You should also include any technical effects. If the extract is at the beginning of a scene then you may be starting with the lighting going from one state to another in a cross fade, or lights up from blackout. You must state this or your direction will be presumed to be happening in total darkness.

You must also remember that people move and speak at the same time. Do not ignore one in favour of the other. The examiner can not see what you would do so you must describe it as best you can so the examiner can imagine your version of the play in their head.

The marks are as follows:

- 7 marks for moves/voice/relationships
- 7 marks for justification
- 2 marks for technical effects

This gives a total of 16 marks. When added to the ground plan's 4 marks, there are 20 marks for Section B. You should spend 45 to 50 minutes on Section B in the examination.

The following sections of this resource allow you to attempt the assessment tasks.

Directing

Directing means considering a variety of roles involved in a performance and deciding on what you wish to happen. In the case of the examination for Higher, your role is state what you would like to happen, and in the case of actors, how you would guide them to doing so.

The director has the overall concept for the performance of the play. There are various different styles of directing from authoritarian to consensus style. The director has the vision of the play, emphasising the key themes and ideas in the play. The director relays her/his ideas to be developed by all the other roles in the production team. The director will need to negotiate successfully with the following individuals. It is therefore important that the director has clear ideas of what s/he wants to happen.

To have a strong directorial concept, you must have a strong understanding of all the roles in a production team.

Set designer and deviser

The set designer researches and plans and often makes the whole set (the area that the actors perform in). They need to reflect the practical requirements of the play as dictated in the script. They also need to reflect the ideas and themes of the play as well as the style, period, setting and atmosphere. Their design should also be made in liaison with the director and match his/her requirements.

Lighting designer and technician

The lighting designer chooses the types of lights, with effects/colours to reflect the time/place of action. They also have to emphasise particular moments, areas, create mood, tension and reflect the ideas, and the themes of the play. This should be in consultation with the director and stage designer.

Sound designer and technician

All sound effects and music are the sound designer's responsibility. They must look at the requirements of the play in terms of content, style, period, atmosphere and setting. This should also be done in consultation with the director.

Costumer designer and wardrobe manager

All clothing worn on the stage must be chosen/designed specifically for the performance. It should reflect the style and period of the piece. It should reflect the design concepts as already discussed in consultation with the director. They need to keep notes and/or drawings to interpret the script.

Make-up designer and artist

The make-up artist designs suitable make-up and hair for the actors to reflect their character, status, background and themes of the play. They may need to consult with the director and the costume designer.

Props designer and manager

The person in charge of the properties (props) has to decide which props are suitable and would enhance the production. They need to decide what style the props should have, in consultation with the designer and/or director and/or actors.

Stage management

The stage manager is in charge of the production while it is being performed. The stage manager needs to attend rehearsals and keep an accurate log of all movements, actor entrances and exits, all set changes, costume changes, lighting cues, sound cues, prop requirements and movements and any other important factors that may affect the performance. They need to co-ordinate all these details during the performance and ensure that all activities backstage are carried out efficiently and at the right time, in the right order to allow for a smooth performance.

Actor

An actor performs plays in a suitable style, reflecting the ideas and themes of the play. The actor is under the charge of the director. The actor needs to keep notes on their interpretation of character, list their tasks and preparation and annotate their script with moves and directions.

Directing actors

The director has to have a clear understanding of acting to communicate it the directorial commentary.

The directorial commentary must refer to voice and movements.

Voice:

- strength
- pitch
- time
- accent
- volume
- clarity
- emphasis
- pause
- tone
- articulation
- fluency

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- intonation
- register
- quality

Movements:

- open/closed
- angular/curved
- symmetrical/asymmetrical
- balance
- speed
- timing
- positioning
- use of levels
- use of space
- rhythm
- stance
- use of direction
- gesture
- facial expression

When describing how you wish your actors to move and talk, try to incorporate a style of moving.

An example might be that instead of ‘walking’, describe ‘walking tired’ or ‘slowly dragging feet’. The more concise the description, the clearer and actor and an examiner will understand your intentions.

All instructions must be justified.

Act One, Part One

(pages 295–303)

Why would Act One, Part One be important in any production of the play?

Provides context of the play and gives background to the action/storyline

- We learn that Algernon Moncrieff lives in London's fashionable West End.
- We find out that Lady Bracknell is his aunt and he is awaiting her arrival with her daughter Gwendolen.
- We meet Algernon's friend Jack Worthington. We find out that Algernon knows him as Ernest.
- We discover that Jack is in love with Gwendolen, but needs Algernon's consent to marry her.
- Jack reveals he made up the character of Ernest as it gives him an excuse to visit London.
- Jack admits that people in the country believe he has a troubled brother called Ernest.
- Jack also reveals that he is the guardian to Cecily Cardew, the granddaughter of Thomas Cardew who adopted Jack as a baby.
- Algernon admits he too has an imaginary friend called Bunbury that he uses as an excuse to visit the country.
- Algernon agrees to help Jack propose to Gwendolen.

Begins plot

- The relationships between Algernon and Jack, and Algernon and Lady Bracknell are revealed.
- The fact that both Jack and Algernon use imaginary people to allow them to visit other places is shown.
- We discover that Jack was adopted and has a ward, Cecily.
- We also discover that Cecily's governess is Miss Prism.
- Jack reveals his love for Gwendolen.
- Algernon agrees to help Jack.
- Jack and Algernon are both seen to use deception in this very mannered society.
- Algernon's servant Lane is seen to be very dry humoured and a match for him.

Establishes central themes and issues

- Social critique of the Victorian class values are introduced with the self gratifying nature of Algernon, obsessed with image and eating cucumber sandwiches. Wilde manages to comment on social class standing, style and manners, and Victorian culture.
- References to the masks in society are shown through Algernon and Jack having their hidden identities and double lives reflecting Wilde's own double life as both a publicly married man and also a secretly homosexual man. References to the homosexual community and culture in London are also made.
- The idea of marriage and Wilde's view of it being a hypocritical cover used for status to hide affairs and destroy any passion between individuals. Marriage is referred to as business, not pleasure. The idea of marriage is trivialised. Wilde often uses well known phrases and reverses them for both humour and commentary.
- Passion is exalted with food and eating representing sensual reactions and lust.
- Throughout the scene Wilde also demonstrates his ability to create witty one-liners, thus part of the theme of the play is demonstrate Wilde's own cleverness.

Introduces key characters and relationships

- The characters of both Jack and Algernon are introduced. Both characters live their lives through masks, deliberately. Both are stock characters, recognisable to the upper and middle classes.
- Algernon is a very vain man, caring about his own personal appearance and the surroundings he lives in. We are immediately informed this is a play about the upper classes. Most of what he says is trivial, reflecting what Wilde felt about the society he was living in.
- Jack is more serious. He is accepted in society due to the money he has from his adoption. He uses the correct manners and phrasing. This is all the more important due to the unknown circumstances surrounding his birth.
- We are introduced to the character/name of Ernest (or Bunbury in Algernon's case). The pun on the name and the idea of being earnest is introduced.
- The characters of Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen, Cecily and Miss Prism are also introduced through reference only.

Why might Act One, Part One be important in your production of the play?

- As a director, how will you ensure that your audience understands the background to the play? Are they familiar with the conventions and attitudes of Victorian time?

- How will your production establish a setting other than that of late 19th Century London?

- What are your directorial concepts? How will Act One, Part One introduce them?

- How do you want you audience to feel towards Algernon? How will you direct the actor to achieve this?

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- How do you want your audience to feel towards Jack? How will you direct the actor to achieve this?

- How do you want your audience to feel towards Lane? How will you direct the actor to achieve this?

- How do you want your audience to feel towards the characters we are yet to meet – Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen, Cecily and Miss Prism? How will you direct the actors to achieve this?

- What kind of relationship between Algernon and Jack do you want to create? How do you wish the characters to act this?

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- What kind of relationship between Algernon and Lane do you want to create? How do you wish the characters to act this?

- What image about society and class do you want to create?

- What thematic elements do you wish to highlight at this point of the play?

- What target audience do you wish to aim your production to and how will you make the opening scene relevant to them?

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- What required staging elements do you need to consider for this scene?

- What are your design concepts for the play?

- Are there any specific set design, costume, prop or lighting requirements that you would like to introduce?

Draw a ground plan for the start of this scene. Include exits and entrances, set, audience position and stage shape and starting positions of the actors. Remember to include a key for your ground plan.

Act One, Part Two

(pages 303–16)

Why would Act One, Part Two be important in any production of the play?

Development of plot

- Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen are introduced. She is surprised at the lack of cucumber sandwiches, which Algernon has already eaten. This is explained by a lie from Lane.
- Algernon excuses a later evening engagement by using his imaginary friend Bunbury.
- Jack proposes to Gwendolen and she accepts only due to the fact his name is Ernest. As it is not, Jack quietly decides to get re-christened Ernest.
- Jack reveals that he was found in a handbag at Victoria Station.
- Lady Bracknell refuses to agree to the engagement and after hearing of Jack's lack of parentage demands that he obtains parents before any wedding acceptance can happen.
- Jack reveals that his ward is too interested in his imaginary brother Ernest and decides to 'kill' him off to protect her from unsuitable suitors. Algernon notes this down as he wants to know more of Cecily.
- Gwendolen returns and asks for Jack's country address (which Algernon also notes down) so that she can write to him.

Further illustration of themes and issues

- The satire of class values is further developed by Lady Bracknell's appearance. She symbolises the extremes of upper class Victorian society. Marriages are planned and arranged according to social status. Love has no factor in it. Neither do the participants as it is Lady Bracknell whom will decide who Gwendolen marry. The humour is further heightened by her discovery of Jack's lack of parents wherein she instructs to obtain some. Marriage is further shown by Wilde to be a duty not a pleasure.
- Wilde further makes statements about the oppression of the classes through withholding education. Although done in a very light hearted manner, Lady Bracknell does reference the French Revolution and why education is a danger to the upper classes.
- There is a nod to homosexuality, in Algernon saying that men should become like their mothers.

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- Wilde uses humour and the absurd to show the farcical nature of the characters, with Jack having been found in a handbag and Gwendolen basing her love solely on a name, Ernest.
- Wilde makes the audience also question the values the place on ideas and situations and therefore on the very self natures we all harbour. Lady Bracknell has little sympathy for Algernon's friend Bunbury. She is only concerned that his illness does not affect her social calendar. She cares not if he lives or dies. While humorous, this callous reaction to others illness has a sharp sting to it. It leads the audience to question their own attitudes to others.
- Wilde also continues to use puns through out the scene, demonstrating clever word play.

Development of character and relationships

- Lady Bracknell is introduced, along with her society mannerisms.
- Gwendolen is introduced as is the absurd shallowness of her ideas. She only cares about the name of her suitor, no other factor matters.
- Algernon's plan to further intrude in Jack's life with his noting down of Jack's address, his interest in Cecily and his decision to go 'Bunburying'. This prepares for the future plot to come.
- Jack's background is further revealed but with enough comic mystery as to also set up further plot developments.
- The idea that both 'Bunbury' and 'Ernest' might die is introduced, preparing for the dropping of masks by both Algernon and Jack.

Why might Act One, Part Two be important in your production of the play?

- How does this act develop your overall directorial interpretation?

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- How do you want the audience to feel towards Jack? How will you direct the actor to achieve this? How will this also affect the acting of the character of Algernon?

- How do you want the audience to feel towards Lady Bracknell? How will you direct the actor to achieve this?

- How do you want the audience to feel towards Gwendolen? How will you direct the actor to achieve this?

- What relationship do you want to create between Lady Bracknell and Jack? How will this be shown in performance?

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- What relationship do you want to create between Lady Bracknell and Algernon? How will this be shown in performance?

- What relationship do you want to create between Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen? How will this be shown in performance?

- What relationship do you want to create between Jack and Gwendolen? How will this be shown in performance?

- What impression of Lady Bracknell do you wish to show at her reaction to the finding out Jack was found in a handbag and does not know who his parents were? How will this be shown in performance?

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- How will you be able to show the comedy of the scene without removing the audiences' believability in the characters?

- How will you use the stage space to show the relationships and status between characters in the scene?

Draw a ground plan for the start of this scene. Include exits and entrances, set, audience position and stage shape and starting positions of the actors. Remember to include a key for your ground plan.

Act Two, Part One

(page 317–32)

Why would Act Two, Part One be important in any production of the play?

Development of plot

- We discover Miss Prism teaching Cecily and warning her of the dangers of meeting Jack's wicked brother 'Ernest'.
- Miss Prism reveals that she once wrote a novel.
- The Reverend Chasuble flirts with Miss Prism.
- Algernon arrives and pretends to be Jack's brother, Ernest.
- Jack arrives claiming his brother Ernest is dead.
- On discovering Algernon pretending to be Ernest, Jack orders Algernon to leave.
- Jack requests to be rechristened by Reverend Chasuble.
- Algernon tells Cecily he loves her, while she copies all his words into her diary.
- Cecily agrees to marry as she had already written that they would in her diary. She has even written imaginary letters from him.
- As Cecily tells him that it is the name Ernest she loves, Algernon also decides to be re-christened Ernest.

Further illustration of themes and issues

- Wilde introduces the hypocrisy of religion. Wilde uses Reverend Chasuble and Miss Prism to show religion to typify Victorian society by being meaningless and lacking humour.
- Wilde further comments on marriage, class values and hypocrisy in this scene. Marriage is further described as a duty and that only the unmarried find pleasure. Once again as well as commenting on society, it might be considered that Wilde is commenting on his own life and the secrets in his marriage.
- The hidden nature of sexuality in Victorian culture is further developed by Cecily's fascination with Ernest. She wants Ernest to look wicked. Miss Prism and Reverend Chasuble use innuendo to flirt very obviously, although nothing is actually stated. Wilde again is commenting on the sexual repression in society.

Development of character and relationships

- Miss Prism and Reverend Chasuble are introduced and their potential relationship revealed that behind the formal roles they have, there is passion.
- Cecily and Jack's relationship is shown clearly here with Jack showing his more responsible, fatherly side.
- Cecily is introduced as a girl, held back by her society's repression of knowledge and passion but with a desire to know more. She is also revealed to be similar to Gwendolen by having a shallow idea of whom to marry. She lives in the fantasy world that she has written of in her diary.
- Jack and Algernon's relationship is developed further with Algernon now adopting fully the role of a badly behaved wayward brother.
- Merriman the servant is introduced. He reflects his nature where he keeps an almost comical observation of the characters interactions. He never takes sides and only tries to facilitate what he is requested to do.

Why might Act Two, Part One be important in your production of the play?

- How does this act develop your overall interpretation of the play?

- How do you want your audience to feel towards Cecily? How will you direct the actor to achieve this?

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- How will you build up dramatic tension in the episode? How much humour do you want the audience to find in Algernon's deception to Cecily? How will you direct the actors to achieve this?

- There are a variety of different situations Cecily finds herself in this act. How do you want Cecily to be portrayed in her relationships with Miss Prism, Algernon and Jack? How will you direct the actors to achieve this?

- Jack's role changes in this scene. What aspect of his character do you wish to highlight? How will you direct the actor to achieve this?

- What do you want to convey about the relationship between Miss Prism and Reverend Chasuble? How will you direct the actors to achieve this?

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- How will you want Algernon to act towards Cecily after her acceptance of marriage and her revelations of the fictitious courting she has created?
How will you direct the actors to achieve this?

- How will you show the relationship between Jack and Algernon, with Jack now the victim of his own devices?

- How will you convey the change of setting for this Act? Does this change your overall ideas for the stage setting for the whole play?

Draw a ground plan for the start of this scene. Include exits and entrances, set, audience position and stage shape and starting positions of the actors. Remember to include a key for your ground plan.

Act Two, Part Two

(pages 333–43)

Why would Act Two, Part Two be important in any production of the play?

Development of plot

- Gwendolen arrives and meets Cecily.
- Cecily and Gwendolen discover they are both engaged to Ernest Worthington and compare diaries, a mutual competition of manners ensues with both being very falsely polite to each other.
- Jack arrives whom Gwendolen calls Ernest but Cecily reveals as her guardian Jack.
- Algernon arrives whom Cecily calls Ernest but Gwendolen reveals as her cousin Algernon.
- Both ladies decide they are not engaged to anyone and both leave, having discovered the deception that both Jack and Algernon have played.

Further illustration of themes and issues

- Wilde further satirises love and romance showing appearance to be all that matters, Love and courtship are seen to be trivial with Cecily's description of her courting by Algernon in her fictitious diary, while Algernon proposes and comments on the weather at the same time, revealing the lack of seriousness that Wilde gives it.
- Image is further commented on by Cecily discussing Jack's clothing. Once more Wilde is commenting on the shallow nature of society.
- Cecily is shown to be assertive, through her reaction to the marriage proposal. She takes over from Algernon. Wilde is commenting on the changing role of women in a society where men were seen to be the masters. Both Gwendolen and Cecily are shown to have strong opinions. Indeed it is the women in the play who tend to dominate and control the men. This is shown throughout the play, through the characters of Lady Bracknell, Miss Prism, Cecily and Gwendolen.
- The idea of truth and deception continues to be developed with Jack's honesty being commented on immediately to shown false by the deception he has undertaken with the name Ernest. Algernon has also been caught out in his deception. Wilde uses these masks to shown the deception that is the heart of the society when challenged it crumbles. Jack and Algernon now must attempt to rectify the situation without masks or deception

Development of character and relationships

- Cecily and Gwendolen's characters are fully revealed with the self obsession of Gwendolen demonstrated.
- The ability of the characters to keep a polite façade while secretly undermining each other is also portrayed.
- Algernon and Jack have to reveal their true selves.

Why might Act Two, Part Two be important in your production of the play?

- How does this act develop your overall interpretation of the play?

- How will you build up dramatic tension in the scene?

- How do you want the audience to feel about Cecily in this scene? How will you direct the actor to achieve this?

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- How do you want the audience to feel about Gwendolen in this scene?
How will you direct the actor to achieve this?

- How will you physicalise the verbal jousting between Gwendolen and Cecily?

- How will you show the relationship between Jack, Gwendolen, Algernon and Cecily when the truth of their names is revealed? How will you direct the actors to achieve this?

- How do want the audience to feel about Jack and Algernon at the end of this scene?

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- How will you make the mannerisms and societal criticisms of Victorian society relevant to a modern day audience?

Draw a ground plan for the start of this scene. Include exits and entrances, set, audience position and stage shape and starting positions of the actors. Remember to include a key for your ground plan.

Act Three

(pages 344–58)

Why would Act Three be important in any production of the play?

Development of plot

- Algernon and Jack explain their deception to Cecily and Gwendolen.
- Algernon and Jack explain they will be rechristened and so Cecily and Gwendolen forgive them.
- Lady Bracknell arrives and proclaims that Gwendolen is not engaged to Jack.
- Algernon tells Lady Bracknell that Bunbury is dead and that Cecily and he are engaged. Lady Bracknell approves as Cecily has a large amount of money.
- Jack refuses to allow the marriage unless Lady Bracknell agrees to his marriage to Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell refuses still and prepares to leave.
- Reverend Chasuble arrives and says he is ready to rechristen the men, and Miss Prism is waiting.
- On hearing Miss Prism's name. Lady Bracknell reveals Miss Prism was the nanny in her brother's house.
- It is revealed that 28 years before she mistakenly placed her novel manuscript in the baby's carriage and the baby in her handbag. She then lost the handbag at Victoria station.
- Jack fetches the handbag he was found in and it is confirmed as the one Miss Prism lost.
- Lady Bracknell confirms that Jack is actually her brother's eldest child and that Algernon is his actual brother.
- Lady Bracknell then reveals that his original name was Ernest.
- Gwendolen and Jack embrace, Algernon and Cecily embrace and Reverend Chasuble and Miss Prism declare their love as well.

Further illustration of themes and issues

- Wilde continues to mock society values by continually making the characters value image over substance. It is Algernon's image that makes him the perfect husband. Jack initially presumes Miss Prism is his mother and 'forgives' her for being unmarried which looks bad. Lady Bracknell approves of Cecily only because she has £130,000 that she will inherit.

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- The secret morals of society are further explored through the suggestion of homosexuality in the description of Lady Lancing. Wilde suggests a double life is needed after marriage whether through Bunburying or the homosexuality that Wilde was undertaking. Yet the final line of understanding the importance of being earnest in life might be read as Wilde stating he, and the audience, needs to be true to who he is.

Development of character and relationships

- Miss Prism's role in the grouping links them all together. Her relationship potential with Reverend Chasuble is revealed.
- Lady Bracknell is confirmed in character. Her double standards in attitude are most obvious when she rejects Jack out of hand, but as soon as he has a lineage, accepts him as suitable. Jack as an individual does not change, only his label.
- Gwendolen and Cecily again confirm the shallow nature of their characters in reaction to Jack and Algernon.
- Only Jack and Algernon appear to develop through the course of the play, both recognising the need to put aside pretences and be honest. However Wilde suggests this may not happen as they desire to be accepted into the hypocritical society of Lady Bracknell.

Why might Act Three be important in your production of the play?

- How does this Act develop your overall directorial interpretation?

- How will you stage Lady Bracknell's discovery of the engagements?

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- How do you want Jack portrayed in his attempted blackmail of Lady Bracknell to have her accept his engagement? How will you direct the actors to achieve this?

- How do you want Miss Prism to be acted? How do you want the audience to feel about her as she reveals her past actions?

- How do you want to show the different characters' reactions to Jack revealing the handbag? How will you direct the actors to achieve this?

- What changes in characterisation do you wish to be seen as Lady Bracknell reveals Jack's true parentage? How will you direct the actor to achieve this?

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- How do you want the audience to feel at the end of the play? What ideas do you want the audience to leave the performance, thinking about?

- What overall tone do you wish Act Three to have?

- What required staging elements do you need to consider for this scene?

- Are there any specific set design, costume, prop or lighting requirements that you would like to have?

OVERALL DIRECTIONAL INTERPRETATION AND DRAMATIC COMMENTARY

- What are your ideas for promoting the play in ways that reflect your directorial and design concepts?

Draw a ground plan for the start of this scene. Include exits and entrances, set, audience position and stage shape and starting positions of the actors. Remember to include a key for your ground plan.

Section 3: Directory of acting pieces

Character summaries

Jack Worthington

Jack is the character around which all the plot strands revolve and is the role that the audience most identifies with. His character allows the audience access to the upper class society in which the characters inhabit. He is not fully a part of the privileged world, as his lineage is questioned, yet he aspires to be. He both detests Lady Bracknell's patronage and snobbery yet seeks approval and acceptance so that he can marry Gwendolen. While nervous of Lady Bracknell at first, he does stand up to her on the occasions he meets her. In Act One, he deals with her interrogation, justifying himself and being willing to produce the handbag. In Act Three he is quick witted enough to withhold his consent to the marriage of Cecily and Algernon if his engagement to Gwendolen is denied. Jack demonstrates a more serious nature than Algernon, while still displaying mannerisms and wit that give the play life. Jack's mask of Earnest reveals the hypocrisy of Victorian society and values, yet he is willing to be the first to discard deception to achieve happiness. That said, his whole life had been built upon mistaken identity that again exposes the falseness of the society in which he lives where one is judged by material birth rather than ability and character. His own hypocrisy is demonstrated in his willingness to deceive Gwendolen to achieve his desire yet feels Algernon unsuitable for his ward Cecily, even though Algernon is no different to him in actions.

Algernon Moncrieff

Algernon is the role that fully allows Wilde to reveal his wit and cleverness in language. Like Jack, Algernon has created a fictitious character to escape the normality of his repressed Victorian life. While an audience may relate closest to Jack, it is Algernon whom the audience will enjoy the most as he is irreverent and funny. It is Algernon who mocks the world of *The Importance of Being Earnest* more than any other. Algernon is sharp and manipulative yet lives in the thrall of his aunt, forever seeking approval. He is the man who has yet to grow up. Even in his engagement to Cecily there is an immaturity where he falls in love with the image of Cecily before even knowing her true nature. Once again Wilde uses Algernon to show the shallowness of the

Victorian society. Algernon's character is somewhat sidelined by Act Three where he becomes more of an observer of the revelations involving Jack, Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism.

Gwendolen Fairfax

Gwendolen is much more than a token role for Jack and Lady Bracknell to fight over. In Act One she is clever and intelligent, even if her focus is in the trivial. While agreeing to her mother to obey and appear submissive, she does return to see Jack against her mother's wishes. She offers her love and manages to obtain Jack's country address to visit. She travels to the country on her own, showing strength of character and determination. Her desire to find the truth about Cecily's engagement also shows a sense of duty and determination. The scene between her and Cecily, while outwardly polite, is full of spite and revenge and reveals a sharp intelligence in her wit. The discovery of the deceit by Jack and Algernon drives her closer to Cecily. She does seem inconsistent in her readiness to forgive Jack and immediately return to her shallow love, but that again is Wilde using a character to comment on the shallow nature of Victorian society and morals.

Cecily Cardew

Cecily represents youth and beauty. Her immaturity is shown in the fantasy life she has created in her diary. Yet there is a subtle maturity in her in that she uses the diary to great effect to gain her own will. She has a real strength as she takes over Algernon's proposal and dominates the situation. This suggests the future nature of their life together. Wilde appears to create characters where the women dominate the men, and this may well be a reflection not only of his view of society but from the personal experience of his family life. Cecily is clever and cunning in a subtle way with her exchanges with Gwendolen, again seeming to eventually control that situation. Outwardly Cecily appears to be submissive but she manages to control and manipulate all those around her. While arranging her own future marriage, she also is the one that starts the matchmaking process between Reverend Chasuble and Miss Prism. She is flirtatious and also manages to arrange to be alone with Algernon.

Lady Bracknell

Lady Bracknell is the representation of the privileged society that the characters inhabit. Her world is dictated by birth and status. She acts as a business woman in the approval of the marriages, where financial stability and societal standing are all important. She is a caricature, yet must be played by any actor with the utmost of believability. It is through her that all the characters are linked, which makes her role crucial. All the characters look to her for approval and she allows the other characters status to be shown. This is clear when in Act Three she fails to give Miss Prism a title, referring to her

only as Prism and thus confirming her status as a mere servant. More than any other character, it is her lines that show the vapid nature of the upper class Victorian society. Her comments show a trivial emptiness to what is deemed important. She dominates the scenes she is in and her arrogance means she dominates the characters around her.

Miss Prism

Miss Prism is a stock character. She is an older single woman, who has repressed her life. She is absent minded and cheerful. Her main role is to unravel the plot. What is interesting is the manner in which she contrasts to the younger couples in the play. While their pairings are shallow and based on image and status, Miss Prism's love seems to have a great deal more passion and innuendo suggested. Any performer of the role must have awareness to attempt to bring a greater depth to what is a fairly stereotypical characterisation.

Reverend Canon Chasuble

Similar to Miss Prism, Reverend Chasuble is also a stock character. While he represents religion, he is also used by Wilde to criticise the institution with his repressed sexuality revealed through the fairly unsubtle innuendo he reveals. Of all the characters, he most closely shows the restoration comedy roots of the play. He is used mainly to allow plot devices to happen without actually changing the events of the play.

Merriman

Merriman is a conventional butler. As a servant he is privy to what goes on but he does not engage or intrude on the action. He merely acts on what he hears and is told. He is an observer, as many of the lower classes were to upper class society at the time. The challenge for the actor is to make the character believable and engaging without ever upstaging or intruding on the action of the play.

Lane

Lane is a very different servant to Merriman. Lane actively engages with the characters, managing to lie effectively for Algernon to disguise the fact that Algernon has eaten all the cucumber sandwiches. The fact that he manages to do so without hesitation to Lady Bracknell shows that he has strength of character. He does comment on what is happening, whether it is money or marriage. He is an observer who has opinions. His formal front leads him to have a very dry sense of humour and it is a role that, while small, has great scope to allow an actor to stretch without dominating a scene.

Recommended acting pieces

All page references are taken from Wilde, Oscar, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Penguin Classics, London (1995).

Page reference: 298–303 (Act One)	
Opening line: Algernon	My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily.
Closing line: Algernon	Yes, but you must be serious about it. I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them.
Casting: 2 male and 1 supporting role	
Characters: Algernon, Jack and Lane	
Approximate length: 8 minutes	
Comments: In this scene, Jack and Algernon reveal their secret lives to one another. It set in a lounge room and Wilde offers little in stage instructions. The scene visually must be engaging. The dialogue is superb, but needs strong comic timing, while being played in a believable fashion. This scene is a great piece to showcase strong actors as both Jack and Algernon are evenly placed in it. Lane is a silent supporting role.	

Page reference: 305–7 (Act One)	
Opening line: Jack	Charming day it has been, Miss Fairfax.
Closing line: Gwendolen	...I hope you will always look at me just like that, especially when there are other people present.
Casting: 1 male and 1 female role	
Characters: Jack and Gwendolen	
Approximate length: 4 minutes	
Comments: This scene is a light scene between the two lovers. It shows Gwendolen's shallowness and focus on image. Jack comes over as somewhat bumbling, and Gwendolen's determination for him leads to much of the humour. It would be very easy to act Gwendolen as if she was stupid and this is a danger to be avoided. The attraction and appeal that Jack has for Gwendolen must be clear to the audience, and therefore her performance must not weaken her standing in the image of the audience. It is the content and not the delivery of the lines that shows the shallowness of the characters.	

Page reference: 308–11 (Act One)	
Opening line: Lady Bracknell	Mr. Worthing! Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture. It is most indecorous.
Closing line: Lady Bracknell	...Good morning, Mr. Worthing!
Casting: 1 male, 1 female and 1 supporting role	
Characters: Jack, Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen	
Approximate length: 4 minutes	
<p>Comments: Lady Bracknell is the dominant role in this scene. Her outrage and one-liners make it a gift of a scene to any actor, yet also poses difficulties as it would be very easy to make the role a pantomime stereotype and thus lose any dramatic impact. The role could easily be played by a talented male actor as well as a female. Jack acts more as a cipher, though does allow for some depth as he is interrogated over his parentage. Gwendolen is virtually mute through out the majority of the scene. It is potentially the strongest scene for Lady Bracknell as it fully establishes her grotesque nature.</p>	

Page reference: 317–19 (Act Two)	
Opening line: Miss Prism	Cecily, Cecily! Surely such a utilitarian occupation as the watering of flowers is rather Moulton's duty than yours?
Closing line: Miss Prism	That would be delightful.
Casting: 2 female and 1 male	
Characters: Miss Prism, Cecily and Reverend Chasuble	
Approximate length: 4 minutes	
<p>Comments: While short, this scene beautifully explores Cecily's character and allows us to see the relationship between Chasuble and Miss Prism. All the characters manage to have equal roles, although the women do dominate. There is some humorous dialogue for Reverend Chasuble with his innuendos that allow for some reactions from Miss Prism. This piece allows for very carefully choreographed mannerisms between the characters.</p>	

DIRECTORY OF ACTING PIECES

Page reference: 329–32 (Act Two)

Opening line: Algernon I hope, Cecily, I shall not offend you if I state quite frankly and openly that you seem to me...

Closing line: Cecily What an impetuous boy he is! I like his hair so much. I must enter his proposal in my diary.

Casting: 1 female, 1 male and 1 supporting role

Characters: Cecily, Algernon and Merriman

Approximate length: 5 minutes

Comments: This scene allows the role of Cecily to dominate Algernon and show a control. Her character is quick witted and intelligent. Algernon almost becomes lost through her superiority. As such this scene is a challenge for both actors. Algernon must remain his boyish rogue nature but also reveal a bewilderment and confusion over Cecily while still adoring her. As in the other scenes, the dialogue is quick and full of humour, although the performances must appear oblivious to the irony of their comments. Merriman is a very minor role with only two lines.

Page reference: 333–8 (Act Two)

Opening line: Merriman Miss Fairfax.

Closing line: Gwendolen ...I hope you will always look at me just like that, especially when there are other people present.

Casting: 2 female and 1 supporting role

Characters: Cecily, Gwendolen and Merriman

Approximate length: 7 minutes

Comments: The dialogue in this scene between Gwendolen and Cecily is one of verbal fireworks. For the performers the challenge is to remain outwardly calm and full of manners, while every line of dialogue is full of sarcasm and attack. It allows for a real depth of characterisation and performance from the actors and would be particularly suitable for very able students. The subtle performances needed means it is also a scene where weaker students may struggle to successfully capture the depth of multiple meanings displayed in the scene. Actors are limited in their physicality yet still need to hold a very strong sense of audience attention. The actors have to remember that while this scene is very funny, the characters have no realisation of the humour and are serious in their roles. This is a wonderful scene for the actor playing Malvolio to really use their stage presence. Merriman is a very minor role while his presence is needed on stage for the two actresses to respond to.

Page reference: 347–52 (Act Three)	
Opening line: Lady Bracknell	...And now that we have got rid of this Mr. Bunbury, may I ask, Mr. Worthing, who is that young person...
Closing line: Lady Bracknell	...Come, dear, we have already missed five, if not six, trains. To miss any more might expose us to comment on the platform.
Casting: 2 male, 1 female and 2 supporting female roles	
Characters: Jack, Algernon, Lady Bracknell, Cecily and Gwendolen	
Approximate length: 8 minutes	
Comments: This scene allows Jack to play a different characterisation where he is no longer the gentler character but shows his anger and determination against the cold, snobbery of Lady Bracknell. Once again Lady Bracknell's character dominates in a grotesque manner. As always with her role, it is a careful line between portraying her extreme mannerisms and making her a pantomime villain. Algernon and Cecily have much smaller roles and Gwendolen has no lines in this scene.	

DIRECTORY OF ACTING PIECES

Page reference: 353–52 (Act Three)

Opening line: Lady Bracknell Prism! Come here, Prism! Prism! Where is that baby?

Closing line: Jack On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've realised for the first time in my life the vital importance of Being Earnest.

Casting: 1 male and 2 female, 2 supporting males and 2 supporting females

Characters: Jack, Algernon, Lady Bracknell, Cecily, Gwendolen, Miss Prism and Reverend Chasuble

Approximate length: 7 minutes

Comments: Although all the main characters are involved in this final scene of the play, it focuses mainly on the roles of Jack, Miss Prism and Lady Bracknell. The growing excitement and realisation of Jack throughout the scene allows any actor to show a character grow and change in a very short period. The character of Lady Bracknell also allows for a slight change to be shown as the realisation of who Jack is dawns upon her, but the character quickly restores herself to her usual arrogant superiority. Miss Prism loses all confidence and is repentant and the subtle variations of her character need to be displayed. All the other roles remain background for the majority of the scene. This is a very clear and direct scene that allows all performers the chance to demonstrate their acting skills to the best of their abilities.

Resources

Reference texts

Donohue, Joseph (ed), *Oscar Wilde's Importance of Being Earnest: A Reconstructive Critical Edition of the Text of the First Production at St. James's Theatre, London, 1895*, Colin Smythe: London, 1995.

A fascinating text both visually and informally on the process and result of the first production

Ellmann, Richard (ed), *Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1982.

An interesting text, that puts together many of the short writings of Wilde on aestheticism and art. It offers an insight into the man, or at least how Oscar Wilde wanted others to see him.

Fraser, Neil, *Lighting and Sound*, Phaidon Press: London, 1988.

A great student handbook on lighting and sound.

Freedman, Jonathan, *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice Hall: London, 1996.

Similar to many texts, this is highly academic and exhaustive. Much of the content is repeated in summary form in other texts.

Hawkins, Terry, *Stage Management and Theatre Administration*, Phaidon Press: London, 1988.

A great student handbook on stage management and theatre administration.

Holland, Merlin (ed), *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marques: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, Fourth Estate: London, 2003.

A focused, detailed and interesting study that offers what is available in most recent biographies.

Holt, Michael, *Costume and Make-up*, Phaidon Press: London, 1988.

A great student handbook on costume and make-up.

Holt, Michael, *Stage Design and Properties*, Phaidon Press: London, 1988.

A great student handbook on stage design and properties.

RESOURCES

McCaffery, Michael, *Directing a Play*, Phaidon Press: London, 1988.

A great student handbook on directing.

McKenna, Neil, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*, Arrow Books: London, 2004.

Predictably focusing on Wilde's sexuality and debt, this is an easy read with a tabloid sensibility that still is useful if only taken in with other biographies.

Pearce, Joseph, *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde*, Harper Collins: London, 2000.

The most useful biography of Oscar Wilde tries to undo the false myths and allegations that have surrounded his life. This biography is written in very accessible style with clear chapter delineations.

Raby, Peter (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1997.

This is an immensely detailed text. It focuses on Wilde's cultural life and literary world. It contains documentary evidence and all the reference material needed to anyone who wishes to have a deeper understanding of Wilde's works. One article deals solely with *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Sloan, John, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2003.

Very clear literary text, pulling together many sources and clearly giving depth to the serious student of Wilde.

Wilde, Oscar, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Penguin Classics: London, 1995.

This version contains six of Wilde's plays and the Grisby scene that Wilde edited from the final three act version of the play. The other five plays included are 'An Ideal Husband', 'Lady Windermere's Fan', 'Salomé', 'A Woman of No Importance', and 'A Florentine Tragedy'. Good value and easily obtainable.

Wilde, Oscar, *Oscar Wilde: A Life in Letters*, Fourth Estate: London, 2003.

This text shares the ideas and words of the author himself, which adds to the depth of the readers' knowledge. However, most of the content is not linked to *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Wilde, Oscar, *The Wit and Wisdom of Oscar Wilde: A Treasury of Quotations, Anecdotes, and Observations*, Crown Publications: London, 1999.

Witty and insightful, the text contains not only Wilde's quick wit but also some commentary and context that gives some depth to the character of Wilde.

Audio-visual resources

Asquith, Anthony, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, ITV DVD, UK PAL, 2001.

The DVD of the most accurate filmed version from 1952.

Gilbert, Brian, *Wilde*, Universal, UK PAL, 1997.

The filmed biography of Oscar Wilde starring Stephen Fry.

Parker, Oliver, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, UK PAL, 2002.

A modern film of the play starring Colin Firth, Rupert Everett and Reese Witherspoon. While beautifully filmed and relevant to a modern audience, the ending is changed from the original play.

Wilde, Oscar, *The Importance of Being Earnest (Audiobook)*, Hodder and Stoughton Audio Books, London, 2007.

A full cast recording of the play, featuring Dame Judi Dench.

Oscar Wilde's plays

Vera; or, The Nihilists (1880)

The Duchess of Padua (1883)

Salomé (French version) (1893)

Lady Windermere's Fan (1892)

A Woman of No Importance (1893)

Salomé: A Tragedy in One Act (1894)

An Ideal Husband (1895)

The Importance of Being Earnest (1895)

La Sainte Courtisane and *A Florentine Tragedy* (1908)

Oscar Wilde's prose

The Canterville Ghost (1887)
The Happy Prince and Other Stories (1888)
Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories (1891)
Intentions (1891)
The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891)
A House of Pomegranates (1891)
The Soul of Man under Socialism (1891)
De Profundis (1905)
The Rise of Historical Criticism (1908)
The Letters of Oscar Wilde (1960)

Online resources

<http://www.sqa.org.uk>

The Scottish Qualifications Agency's website

<http://www.curriculumforexcellencescotland.gov.uk>

The *Curriculum for Excellence* website, detailing new developments and sharing practice; produced by Learning and Teaching Scotland.

<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk>

Learning and Teaching Scotland's webpage; many resources to support learning and teaching across all curriculum areas and levels.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/844>

Project Gutenberg features e-books. This page offers the complete text of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It is a useful reference but please be aware of copyright laws if considering copying or printing anything from this site.

http://www.vam.ac.uk/tco/subjects/drama1/1717_plays_online_imbe/1717_characters/index.html

This website offers information on the theatre of Wilde's time, the first production, other notable productions, characters in the play, costume design and set design.

http://www.theatrehistory.com/irish/importance_of_being_earnest.html

This site offers a synopsis of the play. It has links to information about Oscar Wilde and quotes from the play.

http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/English_Literature/Earnest/Importance.html

This website poses many questions for students as well as offering images for research purposes.

<http://www.cmgww.com/historic/wilde/index.php>

<http://www.oscarwildesociety.co.uk/index.html>

These sites provide information about Oscar Wilde and all matters relating to his works.

<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/wilde/wildeaccount.html>

An article relating to Wilde's trial.

<http://www.theimportanceofbeingearnest.co.uk>

Details of a 2008 production of the play, with some brief background information.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oWBdIx9IQE>

This is one of many YouTube clips from various films of the play. The scene here is from the 1952 Anthony Asquith film. It is the scene with Lady Bracknell interrogating Earnest/Jack.